



Video "artists" use equipment at the Experimental Television Center while center coordinator Brian Byrnes, right, stands by to offer assistance

Is Video Art Really Art? See It for Yourself

IN A second-floor walk-up at a busy intersection on the eastern edge of Binghamton's business district, television is something quite different from the commercial creature we've come to know it as.

In this place, if you wish, you can find videotapes of some productions that, well, are downright odd to those of us accustomed to the "daytime dramas," the game shows, the movies, the dull series and the CBS Evening News.

For here, in the large dimly lit main room of the Experimental Television Center, rows of television equipment — some advanced innovative devices, others used pieces of electronic antiquity — are used in something known as "video art."

Grasping what this relatively new medium of expression called video art means isn't so easy.

During the past Christmas season, a well-known newspaper columnist wrote about the popularity of video games. You know, those boxes you hook up to your TV and it makes your family's center of entertainment perform new tricks by sending a blip of light flashing back and forth across the screen. On these things called video games you can compete at armchair athletics such as hockey and tennis,

For most of us, TV is when we sit down in front of the set and watch the late movie. But for some, TV is something else.

Story /Lou Ganim
Photos /John Bolas Jr.

or you can be amused for hours batting this blip against a vertical white line by yourself something usually called "practice."

Since a lot of you probably bought or received one of them for Christmas, you probably don't need any further description.

Now, back to that columnist. He said that even though television has been around for a long time (conceptually and primitively since the 1880s, commercially since 1939), nobody really knew why it was invented.

So until somebody could figure out what television was made for, people used it for soap operas, talk shows and the like, according

to the writer. Then somebody came up with video games, and finally the purpose for television was at hand, he wrote.

That, in a way, is what video art is all about. Certainly, making an analogy between games and art is unfair, but the underlying idea is the same.

For most of its history television has been used mainly as an extension of other art forms — it has brought you theater, dance, music. But it has never been an artistic vehicle by itself, it has only been — as Ralph I. Hocking, the director of the Experimental Television Center in Binghamton, says — "a conduit" for other disciplines.

Hocking and others are experimenting in a nebulous area called video art, which attempts to make the one-eyed electronic piece of technological wizardry an art form of itself.

To do this, the Experimental Television Center (ETC) has received a series of grants from the New York State Council on the Arts since 1971, grants that have totaled \$317,674. Last year the center also received \$12,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts for some specialized research in developing equipment.

Sometimes video productions have taken the form of, for example, a message in white,

synthesizer and the keyer, things that can best only be grasped by seeing them. Without a lot of thought, images can be changed, colors can be mixed and sound can be added to provide a product.

Hocking says that a person can easily get wrapped up in that, but he refers to it only as "moving wallpaper."

"We are trying to realize what TV can do to change time. It can be something more than what you sit there and watch," Hocking said.

The ETC, which is over a luncheonette at 164 Court Street, has become an information center for video art techniques and information and is complementary with another center in Buffalo. The Binghamton facility is heavy into the development of "hardware," that is, the development of the electronic equipment to achieve effects, the nuts and bolts. The Buffalo center is into "software," the application of the devices that have been developed.

Not that either center excludes either activity, but, together, the two centers balance each other.

And the equipment, counseling and shelter of the ETC in Binghamton is used not only by persons deep into the exploration of video art, but by persons who wish only to dabble in the electronic medium, and by individuals and groups looking for practical application.

There have also been more-familiar programs, including workshops for youngsters in television production and workshops for junior and senior high school students on video art.

When the center first opened in 1971, when "video art" was even newer than it is now, Hocking was much freer with the equipment, allowing just about anyone the chance to borrow television cameras and videotape machines.

The surprising thing was, he recalled, that nothing ever was stolen.

Today, while the center is open to anyone, the use of the equipment is a bit more restricted.

Some of the center's work has turned up on public television and some commercial television programs of local origin in New York and Binghamton.

But the center also runs from time to time series of programs to familiarize and instruct people on video art, and presents showings of works done at the Binghamton center and by other video artists.

Recently the center showed some works that were done by some well-known video artists who had been awarded grants during the past year. Some of those productions were of a conventional appearance, with the documentary being a popular format. In these productions, the attempt is made to employ the television picture as the main vehicle for a message and not to use the image to support a verbal statement.

One of the works was a statement on the lives of the South American Indians along the Amazon, with a heavy revolutionary theme; another presented an idyllic peasant life in the vineyards of the Bordeaux region of France.

Probably the best way to get an idea of what this thing called video art is all about is to see it for yourself.

